1: Glacken E-5 (1951-1952) 1953 AC7 Okinawa AC7

1

Introduction

The study of religious ideas in Okinawa quickly involves one in a quagmire of beliefs, formal observances, and conventions, of various origins, often grafted on one another, so that it is almost impossible to disentangle them. There is a vagueness among the people, a lack of distinctions among various types of belief, and this makes the analysis even more uncertain and subject to error. When after death, for example, does the deceased become a god (hotoke-sama) in the Buddhist pantheon? At the end of the 49th day when the temporary white tablets are burned and replaced by the permanent red ones? Or at the end of the 33rd year when the dead person is no longer mourned, and the anniversary of his death no longer observed? And is he regarded as a god in the Buddhist pantheon or simply as a god? I was unable to find satisfactory answers to these questions.

Religious beliefs, such as ancestor worship, are closely related to the underlying ideas of the family system. Praying to the ancestors at the god shelf ties Buddhism in with the family system, but worship at the Buddhist alter and the god shelf would, if accepted at its face value, give an erroneous idea of the vitality of Buddhism and the degree to which it has become a religion of the people.

The student of these matters must also make certain that this vagueness and mixing of religious belief is an actuality and does not arise out of faulty comprehension. I became convinced, however, that the vagueness, the compounding of beliefs from different sources, the uncertainty are realities, and this point of view was later reinforced in reading the works of students of an earlier age.

There is a noticeably sharp cleavage in belief between the old and the young, with the dividing line around the age of 55. Furthermore, among the old, it is the women who believe and worship. The old men are much less serious, and, except for the few antiquarians, are much more poorly informed.

2

Contemporary Religious Beliefs

The religious tradition of Okinawa is a feminine one. Women appear in the creation myth as the practitioners of religion. The priestess (noro) system became an institutionalized religion in the early 16th century. From that time until the very recent past, the priestesses have been strong and influential because, for one thing, they had property and the economic power that accompanied its possession. These priestesses have now largely disappeared. But women remain the chief repositories of religious knowledge and belief.

Buddhism, as an organized religion, is of no importance, even though most villagers say they are Buddhists. Buddhist symbols and practices inspired by Buddhism remain, but that is a different matter. The universal use of the Buddhist god shelf or household altar, the observance of Buddhist holidays, such as higan, are matters more of custom and tradition than of religious fervor. This is significant because the Okinawans, for almost 70 years, were a part of the Japanese homeland, the greatest Buddhist nation on earth. During my stay in Okinawa, I thought that the recent war had caused the decline in Buddhist influence. This is only partly true. Subsequent reading of the older literature made it clear that in modern times, Buddhism has not been a living force. The ethical and political systems were primarily Confucian. The priestesses had a greater influence on daily life and at death ceremonials, at least in rural Okinawa.

A variety of practices concerned with the worship of natural phenomena, such as the summits of mountains, groves of trees, wells and springs and the sea survive, but they are not strong.

There is little evidence of Shinto beliefs, except in a few families who were long resident in Japan. Shrine Shinto, closely tied in with emperor worship, has been abolished.

Villagers are acquainted with Christianity, but I encountered no adherents. The name of the 19th century missionary, Dr. Bettelheim, is still remembered by people in Hinatogawa and Hanashiro. Dr. Bettelheim, a Jewish convert to Christianity, came to Okinawa in 1846. He was both ineffective and unhappy, but his ineffectiveness was probably due more to the lack of enthusiasm of the Okinawan rulers than to personal inadequacy.

3

Buddhism

Buddhist formalisms and home observances exist in all the villages. But the religion is not practiced. The people do not attend services or temples, nor do they support or seek out priests. This present situation is apparently little changed from the recent past. Captain Basil Hall (1816) mentioned the apparent low status of the bonze. Charles Pahs, on Perry's staff, said that, "The people, however, appear to be indifferent to it, and do not seem to have much veneration for it. Basil Hall Chamberlain wrote in 1893 that Buddhist influence was almost extinct. In 1910, Simon spoke of the weakness of Buddhism and that priests often did not participate in funerals. Goldschmidt in 1927 made similar observations.[1]

1 Hall, as cited, 98-99; Hawks, Perry's expedition to Japan, II, 49. Chamberlain, On the manners and customs of the Loochooans, In: Trans. of the Asiatic society of Japan, 21 (1893), 274. Simon, Beitrage zur Kenntnis der Riukiu-Inseln, 103-04, 177. Goldschmidt, Neu-Japan, 145.

The only Buddhist priest in the areas studied was at the small village of Maegawa, within walking distance of Hinatogawa and Hanashiro. He was a priest of the Jōdo sect (Jōdoshu), one of the important sects of Japan, and stressing salvation by faith. The sect of the priest in this village is of no importance, since the rural people now or before the war had neither the interest nor the capacity for doctrinal distinctions. The temples of this sect were burned during the war, including one in the village of Kochinda, a junction point between Naha and Gushichan.

Before the war the colors of the robes varied with the sect and with the position of the priest in the hierarchy. In the Jōdo sect, the lowest grade wore black, followed up the scale by orange, blue or green, a chocolate reddish brown, and purple, the highest. This contrasts sharply with the priest's present improvisations. His is the black robe of the Shinshu sect. It is a summer garment, made of soft light silk called shiya and resembles a man's kimono, but is longer and sweeps the floor. The garment hangs straight down and is not gathered or tucked. The only other religious possessions were a bell and a badly soiled print of the Buddha (oshaku) which hung in his room.

Before the war, some people in the Gushichan area requested the services of a priest at funerals. After the war, the people of Hanashiro, and other villages as well, decided because of the expense, to forego the services of a priest.

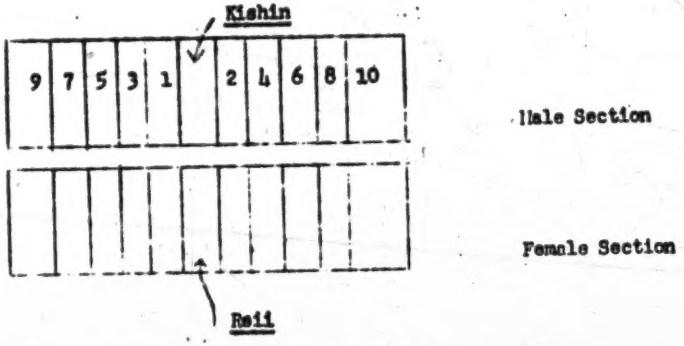
Occasionally this priest officiates when the bones in the temporary tombs of Hinatogawa are moved to the extended family tomb at Itoman, or in a ceremony honoring a death anniversary. Few Okinawans became priests. This priest is a native of Japan, one of the few remaining Japanese priests in the island. At eleven, he entered a Buddhist temple (tera) and has been engaged in religious activity ever since. Now about 50, he has a wife and two children; his head is unshaved and the hair is of a conventional cut. He does not depend on the priesthood for a living, but is employed as an official in a village office.

The situation with regard to Buddhism was quite similar in Hatsuda, although there is no priest in the vicinity. There is little doubt, if the villages studied are typical, that this already moribund religion is disappearing altogether here, choked off by lack of temples, lack of priests, and by indifference.

It is not so with household Buddhism, if this term may be used to describe ceremonies and beliefs centering around the Buddhist god shelf or family altar (butsudan). This household altar is in the second room of every home. Around it collect the sentimental memories of the past, such as family pictures, photographs of young soldiers and dearly loved relatives. Prayers and offerings of food and drink to the dead are made before it.

An important part of the Buddhist altar is a frame holding the memorial tablets for the family dead. These tablets (ihai) are pieces

of wood lacquered red and lettered in gold. The frame has an upper section for the male dead and a lower for the female. The date of death is written on the back of each tablet. In the center of each section is a strip with a Chinese character written on it. The upper or male section has the character, kishin, with a meaning similar to returning to the source (moto ni kaeru). The lower or female section has the character reii, suggesting that your spirit is in this place. The tablets are placed in an order, the first to the left of the middle character, the second to the right, so that the last placed ones are toward the outer edge.



(Arrangement of the Memorial Tablets (ihai)

The frequent occasions throughout the year when devotions are made at the altar have already been described in many of the preceding pages. These can be summarized by saying that offerings and prayers are made (1) to commemorate important dates in an individual's life, like birth, the first birthday, engagement, marriage, death, and the anniversary of a death, (2) during holidays and festivals in which honoring the dead and thanksgiving are dominant themes, and (3) at times of individual and private religious worship or prayer. Some women pray daily after placing a cup of tea, a bowl of rice and a burning charcoal stick on the altar. Others observe the 1st and the 15th of the lunar month.

This household Buddhism, centering around the altar, has no institutional basis. There are no Buddhist temples in any of the villages. Family worship at the altar is both an honoring of the ancestral dead and also, it would seem, an acceptance of the merciful and humane doctrines of the Buddhist faith. Buddhism traditionally is the religion of consolation at death. The fact that ancestor worship takes place at the Buddhist altar, however, does not mean that this is a religion in a doctrinal sense. One has been grafted on to the other.

1: Glacken E-5 (1951-1952) 1953 AC7 Okinawa AC7

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in the toilet.

Religious beliefs shade into other aspects of village life, such as honoring the dead, the obligations of the family system, and the celebration of public holidays and festivals. The war has hastened the decline of many of the old beliefs we have been describing. The inability of the old, during the war and its aftermath, to communicate a body of belief to the newer generation has meant that now, even more than before, religious beliefs and customs are dying out rapidly and henceforth will appear only in vague outlines to inquiring scholarship.

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Chapter 8

Religion

771 177 [776] [769] The religious beliefs of people in Taira and their ritual practices recognize the existence of two different sources of supernatural forces. The old Okinawan religion, which is still practiced by many persons in the village, centers on beliefs in a host of nonhuman spirits that inhabit certain localities. A historically more recent Confucian-Buddist influence from China and Japan has added to these beliefs the veneration of ancestors who, in their divine state after death, control many activities of the living. Under the influence of these two [782] [784] forces, the animistic and the ancestral, life must be conducted in such a way that both remain appeased at all times by proper worship and performance of ritual as well as by avoidance of actions which might offend these supernatural forces.

771 [154] Even though many younger people laugh away the adherence to beliefs, especially in animistic deities, there is much evidence that the life of almost all people is controlled by fears, anxieties, and desires for appeasement stemming from these religious beliefs. Although historically the animistic and ancestral religious beliefs were separate, they are synchronized at present so that it is not always possible to make a clear distinction between each system (Lebra: 1958).

776 [372] The supernatural beings of nature live all around the village. There are mountain deities, deities of the sea, of the well, of trees, and other places. Any localities connected with productive activities, such as the store, the sugar mill, the sugar press, and the village truck, have their own deities. There is also the Deity of Fire, associated with the hearth and the house. He is represented in three hearth stones found in most simple kitchens. Three upright small stones, resembling the hearth stones, are the divine symbols in the village shrine where all these supernatural beings are worshipped.

[782] The supernatural beings living in and around the village appear

2:Maretzki & Maretzki E-5 (1954-1955) 1963 AC7 Okinawa AC7
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ple did not carry it through the streets but along the shore to a spot nearby where the car could pull up.

Communication with ancestral or family spirits lies in the hands of individual households or the larger kin group. In general, as with the nature deities, women maintain the relationship. The oldest woman in the house prays and makes offerings in front of the divine shelf or by the tombs. Sometimes the high priestess, whose only regular role in the cult of ancestors centers around the mythical founder of the village to whom vague references are made, is asked to conduct a special prayer for a family at its ancestral shrine. Such invitations are usually the result of consultation with another religious practitioner to whom one turns in case of misfortune.*

Those who are considering a special undertaking, such as building a new house or moving to another one, or transporting ancestral tablets from one home shrine to another, seek the advice of a diviner, the *sanjinsō* or *yekisha*. This expert, always a man, consults books on the workings of the universe, special astrological calendars from which he can predict events by using a horoscope calculated on the birth date of the person seeking advice.

Although it would seem from the attendance at ceremonies that older people, mostly women, are the supporters of religion, even the most modern of the Tairans seem to share beliefs in the power of the supernatural forces and are loath to make an open break with traditions. One may verbalize that the old religion is just "superstition," but when it comes to dealing with adverse events, when somebody suggests that perhaps the *yuta* should be consulted, or a special offering is in order, or when the old special wine of the gods is prepared from rice for Boat Race Day, then many of the apparent apostates cooperate. To some extent this is done to appease the older people, but fear of neglecting duties, especially toward ancestors, is probably much stronger in general than people's behavior would suggest. Religious influence, then, which controlled so many facets of village life in former days, still acts as a strong force in uniting the members of families and descent groups as well as in binding together the community as a unit separate from other communities.

* See Chapter 9 for description of the *yuta* or shaman.

582 178 average age at the time of marriage, investigation into the registries reveals that the range has narrowed somewhat. Formerly some girls married at thirteen and fourteen; today this would be considered rather unusual.

[177] The Japanese administration attempted to discourage endogamous marriage practices, particularly kin-group endogamy. All agreed that the practice has declined; yet in Kanegusuku nearly 50% of all marriages were within the kin group and 66% of all marriages were within the village. An analysis of these figures on an age basis indicates the practice is declining there.

833 178 893 Sex It is said that sexual standards have changed in that there is less sexual license among the young people and that they tend to have their first relations at a later age than formerly. This is attributed in part to the moral training of the schools. Another factor seems to be the general decline of several informal village institutions which permitted young people considerable sexual freedom. One informant stated that those who continue on to high school and university generally have their first experience at a later age than those who attend only junior high school.

642 177 641 [625] [644] Government The Japanese introduced a modern system of government, abolished the Okinawan aristocracy, and granted suffrage to all males of twenty-five or more years. The American Civil Administration has attempted to liberalize laws and to make possible a greater degree of self-government. Police powers have been limited, universal suffrage has been introduced, and the number of elected officials has been increased.

621 178 To date there has been little change within the village, where suffrage and office-holding remain limited to household heads. Villagers acknowledge that there is greater freedom for action at the local level today; yet they are not desirous of obtaining greater self-government. They feel that it would require too much of their time and that there is too little money available to finance its operation. Village leadership is virtually unchanged. Change where it has occurred has been initiated at a higher level.

632 178 At the township level the electorate has been broadened to include all persons, male and female, over twenty years of age. The mayor who was formerly appointed is now elected to office.

771 177 178 793 Religion There has been a general decline in the indigenous Okinawan religion, effected by Japanese policy, wartime attrition, and the spread of education. Formerly a hierarchy of priestesses extended from the kin group through the community and region to the person of the king's sister, the chief priestess. The Japanese removed the top echelons of this hierarchy, but the kin group and community priestesses continued to function. World War II resulted in the death of many religious functionaries, and as the office is usually hereditary within a specific family and often limited to a particular member of that family, there has often been no replacement for the office. Lastly there is an increasing tendency among the young people, due to the influence of the school, to regard religion as superstition.

796 178 Many villages, especially those without religious functionaries, have discontinued all village ceremonies, and in those few remarkable exceptions